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THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER
28 DECEMBER 1982

Czechs see CIA plot in papal probe

Associated Press

PRAGUE, Czechoslovakia — The CIA is orchestrating reports of Bulgarian involvement in the shooting of Pope John Paul II to weaken Western European opposition to the planned NATO missile deployment, the official Czech news agency said yesterday.

"Anti-communist centers want to injure the international prestige of the socialist countries, to weaken the movement which is expanding in Western Europe against the U.S. missiles which are to be deployed at the launching bases in West European countries," the CTK news agency said, quoting from an article in the Czech Communist Party newspaper.

The article blamed "CIA misinformation activities" for the reports of Bulgarian involvement in the shooting of the Pope on May 13, 1981, and said those activities were part of the campaign to weaken the peace movement.

The Warsaw Pact has accused the United States and its NATO allies of escalating the East-West arms race with its plan to deploy 572 cruise and Pershing 2 missiles in Western Europe beginning in December 1983.

NATO says the missiles are to counter Soviet SS-20 missiles aimed at Western Europe from bases along the western edge of the Soviet Union.

Bulgaria has denied any connection with the shooting of the Pope by Mehmet Ali Agca, a Turk, though Italian investigators have arrested a Bulgarian in the investigation and have issued an arrest warrant for another.

The so-called Bulgarian connection to the shooting has severely strained relations between Italy and Bulgaria.

The government-run media of most Warsaw Pact states have come to the defense of their Bulgarian ally.

In Poland yesterday, a government newspaper ridiculed charges of Bulgarian involvement in the shooting of the Polish-born Pope, calling them "slander against ... socialist states."

The commentary in the daily Zycie Warszawy, or Warsaw Life, said Italian politicians had singled out Bulgaria for their accusations because Agca had passed through the Balkan state on his way to Western Europe.

Agca is serving a life term in an Italian prison for shooting the pontiff. Italian newspapers have reported that Agca admitted to investigators in prison that he had Bulgarian accomplices, though the Italian government never has confirmed the reports. Agca insisted during his trial last year that he had acted alone.

The Warsaw newspaper said Sergei Ivanov Antonov, the Bulgarian airlines official arrested in connection with the shooting, had been chosen by the Italians because "he was not protected by diplomatic immunity."

"Despite the absence of official charges and evidence [against Antonov] Western mass media have unleashed a huge campaign, whose contents are mainly accusations and slanders against Bulgaria and other socialist states," the newspaper said.